DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 022 CE 080 604

TITLE	"Finding Pleasure in the Right Things": A Concept Paper on Arts, School-to-Career, Service Learning, and Community Revitalization.
INSTITUTION	Jobs for the Future, Inc., Cambridge, MA.
PUB DATE	1999-10-00
NOTE	7p.; Co-authored by Project Zero, Harvard University.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.jff.org/resources/publications/index.shtml.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Art Education; Attitude Change; Behavior Change; Career Education; Change Strategies; *Community Development; *Education Work Relationship; *Educational Benefits; Educational Change; Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; Educational Principles; Happiness; High School Students; High Schools; *Individual Development; Interpersonal Competence; Learning Processes; Lifelong Learning; Outcomes of Education; Position Papers; Relevance (Education); Satisfaction; *Service Learning; Well Being; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Authentic Learning; Contextual Learning; Educational Marketing; Reflective Inquiry

ABSTRACT

High schools are simply not designed to help young people develop interests or passions, become deeply engaged and productive in the life of the community, develop a commitment to high-quality work, or make connections and build relationships with peers and adults. School-to-career, arts education, and service learning each offer especially promising avenues for meeting this challenge. Each can lay claim to its own unique and innovative ways to contribute to youth and community development through the following core principles: students learn through relationships; students learn when they are engaged; students learn through active, in-depth investigation and exploration; students learn in multiple contexts and through reflection on authentic problems; and students become lifelong active learners through searching for connections, being persistent, and striving for accuracy. Despite their tremendous value, school-to-career, arts education, and service learning must often struggle against marginalization. Educators can use the following to combat this threat of marginalization: (1) gather and disseminate evidence of effectiveness; (2) emphasize the value of the core principles and key practices; (3) work as colleagues across fields of practice; (4) expand scope beyond schools and bring the discussion to a variety of forums; and (5) examine and speak to public perceptions and priorities. (MN)

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"Finding Pleasure in the Right Things": A Concept Paper on Arts, School-to-Career, Service Learning, and Community Revitalization

Jobs for the Future
and
Harvard Project Zero

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October 1999

Over two thousand years ago, Plato wrote that the most important task of educators is to teach young people to "find pleasure in the right things." Try as they might, most of those working with teenagers in high schools today are finding this difficult to accomplish. The sometimes vibrant, and highly commercialized, youth culture in which many teenagers find their pleasures seems far removed indeed from the traditions and requirements of school, or the habits of mind needed for serious study and intellectual growth.

High schools are simply not set up to help young people to develop interests or passions, to become deeply engaged and productive in the life of the community, to develop a commitment to high quality work, or to make connections and build relationships with peers and adults. As a result, many young people drift through adolescence, only marginally connected to school, the labor force, or family. For some this isolation leads to acts of violence or self-destruction; for others, the result is slow erosion of their ability to earn a decent living or take their place in the community.

One need not look far from the schoolhouse door to find examples of workplaces, community art centers, and youth groups where teens roll up their sleeves and work on projects that matter to them and to a larger community of peers and adults. Those young people lucky enough to find such opportunities come to realize exactly the kinds of pleasures Plato envisioned—the pleasure of doing something for a clear purpose, of engaging in activities that require skill, concentration, and involvement, of contributing to the quality of life of a community, of producing a tangible result.

The challenge for youth advocates and for educators—both inside of school and out—is to find ways to realize the tremendous potential of just such generative experiences to contribute not only to youth development, but also to the arenas of high school reform and community revitalization. Three fields of practice—*school-to-career, arts education, and service learning*—offer especially promising avenues for meeting this challenge. This paper explores the unique contributions as well as the shared, core ideas of these fields. It also suggests how the work within and across these fields could be strengthened and the lessons for school reform made more prominent in this time of heightened interest in the purposes and the design of a high school education.

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Creativity, Craft, and Conscience

School-to-career, arts education, and service learning each can lay claim to its own unique and innovative ways to contribute to youth development and community development. Arts education, for example, fosters creativity in young people and helps to build a vibrant community in which adolescents are active producers as well as consumers of the arts. By fostering craftsmanship and the skills of high performance workplaces, school-to-work contributes to the economic stability and productivity of the community and sets young people on a path towards high-skill employment. Service learning fosters conscience, providing opportunities for active civic membership by giving young people ways to make contributions to their community.

It is tempting to focus on what is special about each of these fields. After all, each appeals to a somewhat different constituency and, survives, at least in part, by making a case for its unique contribution. Yet many of the best initiatives in each of these fields incorporate aspects of the others. It is not unusual for arts education or service learning programs to focus on the very competencies, such as teamwork and problem solving skills, that employers have identified as most important in the workplace; by the same token, some school-to-career initiatives emphasize the importance of making a contribution to one's community, as well as being productive on the job.

While arts education, school-to-career, and service learning national movements are quite different, in practice—or "on the ground"—the three fields have many shared elements. One reason for the common programmatic strategies is that all three fields share an approach to education that promotes authentic, active, community-connected learning. Although the terminology may differ across the fields, the following core principles frame the work in all three:

- Students learn through *relationships*: with peers, teachers, and a community of adults who use knowledge in realms beyond school.
- Students learn when they are engaged, and *engagement* is most likely when students see a *personal and social value* to what they are learning.
- Students learn through active, in-depth *investigation and exploration.*
- Students learn in *multiple contexts*, through opportunities to address and *reflect on authentic problems*, using the kinds of materials and approaches employed by experts.
- Students become *life-long active learners* through developing *habits of mind and work* such as searching for connections, persistence, and striving for accuracy.

These principles build on emerging knowledge about the power of contextualized and situated learning and on theories of adolescent development. In the throes of developing their sense of who they are and who they might become, adolescents become engaged when their efforts are directed at a real problem or need, or allow them to express their ideas, beliefs and creativity to an audience. Each of these fields offers youth multiple opportunities to test out their own ideas, dreams, and emerging

identity in the company of adults who both push and support them to do their best work.

One of the central problems adolescents have with school is their impatience about learning concepts or doing exercises that appear to only have value as gateways to more of the same. They simply do not get excited about accumulating points (or grades) toward some still hazy future goal. Although participating in arts, school-to-work, and service helps young people learn skills that will be useful in the future, they are doing so in the context of learning and producing things that matter in the present.

The shared core principles point to another way in which these three fields of practice contribute powerfully to students' growth and development. For many young people it is through participating in the arts, school-to-work and/or service that they first develop notions about what constitutes high quality work. These fields allow them to encounter real world as well as school standards. By observing and emulating adult expertise and producing work for real audiences, students come to understand the importance of setting and meeting high standards and begin the process of developing their own personal standards of mastery.

Model or Marginal?

Despite the tremendous value young people and educators place on the experiences in these three arenas, each of these fields of practice struggles to sustain its work, both inside and outside of schools. In fact, one of the conundrums of recent high school reform efforts is that many of the very programs cited as models for what schools could become remain marginal and vulnerable, with only a shaky foothold within the institution of the high school.

Practitioners struggle to gain acceptance of school-to-career initiatives, the arts, and service learning as something more than a "special project" or extracurricular experience. At best, students are able to squeeze time into their schedules to gain access to one of these fields through their school's elective offerings. When intensive programs in service learning, school-to-career, or the arts exist, they are often targeted at only one group of students: for example, school-to-career pathways for students deemed unlikely to succeed in the college preparatory track, or an arts magnet program for those with recognized talent in the arts.

Too often, proponents of these approaches to learning operate not only in the margins of schooling, but isolated from each other. A comprehensive high school might offer programs in two or all three of these areas, but the programs are seen as different, even competing, choices for the student rather than a set of practices and approaches to learning that share many features and might be powerfully integrated. Rarely are opportunities taken—or created—to develop meaningful long-term projects that students can carry out either in the school or with community partners.

As educators from all three fields know, public schools, particularly high schools, and school districts harbor many obstacles to the kinds of authentic, active, relationship-based learning promoted by the fields, from lack of time, to curricular constraints, to

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lack of training and preparation for teachers and administrators. The greatest obstacle may be a traditional conception of school, shared by many educators and the general public, based on outdated models of teaching and learning.

Ironically, some of what is now being done in the name of school reform appears to be further reinforcing a traditional and narrow set of strategies and subject matters. Teachers and administrators find themselves caught between what they know about the importance to students of meaningful and purposeful work and the mandates from states and districts to make sure that all students have "covered" a particular body of academic knowledge that will be "on the test."

The initial reaction of teachers to the plethora of standards documents—and especially to the imposition of new standardized tests—tends to be one of retrenchment: "Sure they want us to do things differently, but the bottom line is how our kids score on the test. I can't afford to take time for anything else." One problem with this reaction is that it throws teachers back on pedagogical strategies that they are all too aware have not been working for many of their students. It also results in a further narrowing of the kinds of learning experiences available to young people, many of whom already suffer from isolation and restricted access to the world of adult productive activity.

Improving the American system of public education has been a top priority of the electorate and policymakers for well over a decade. Yet the national conversation about school reform draws from a constricted vocabulary, rarely going beyond rhetorical calls for higher standards or the ritual casting about for who or what to blame for low test scores. The most well-intentioned efforts to improve student performance will fail without sufficient attention to student disengagement from the traditional academic curriculum and the disconnection of young people from adults and from their communities—precisely the issues that are addressed by effective arts education, school-to-career, and service learning initiatives.

Such initiatives not only help students attain the learning goals of school, but they also provide a structured and supported way for them to make the transition to adulthood. Collectively, these fields have a lot to teach us about what it takes to engage students in producing high quality work and how we can create a policy environment that supports this outcome. Between the critical ages of 17 and 25 a disturbing number of young people spend significant portions of time detached from school, the labor force, and family connections. To make a real difference in the lives of young people, we must not only help them achieve academically while in high school, but we must also strengthen their engagement in and connection to productive activities that initiate them into adult communities of practice.

Moving Forward: What Can Be Done

What sustains arts education, school-to-career, and service learning in the face of marginalization in schools and public policy? In large part, it is the dedication and work of practitioners, administrators, community partners, and key leaders. At this time of great challenge and opportunity, these individuals must be strategic in the use of their limited resources. The following activities offer opportunities for practitioners,

community stakeholders, and policymakers to move beyond individual programs and work to sustain and advance the fields collectively.

- **Gather and disseminate evidence of effectiveness.** Each of the three fields has begun to gather a body of evidence in support of their approach. Much of this research focuses on the effectiveness of local programs. For example:
  - A study using the Search Institute Inventory has demonstrated that, when compared to national averages, students in the Minnesota Center for Art Education Arts High School were more likely to possess many of the "internal assets" that reduce their chances of engaging in risky behaviors.
  - Research has shown that graduates of ProTech, Boston's longest-standing and most developed school-to-career program, were more likely than their peers, locally and nationally, to graduate from high school, attend college or other postsecondary school, and have a job—and a job that pays higher wages.
  - Dewey Center for Urban Education, a pre-kindergarten-8th grade public school of choice in Detroit, has tracked the progress of standardized test scores, attendance, discipline problems and school climate since implementing service learning, and the school has seen improvement in each of these major indicators.

  Still, the field and policymakers need more research on promising practices at the program, community, and system levels. As more data on student outcomes and exemplars of practice are documented, the necessary analysis across disciplines of the programmatic elements and policy features that promote success will be possible.

- **Emphasize the value of the core principles and key practices.** In addition to data on student outcomes and exemplars of promising practices, the case for arts education, school-to-career, and service learning is strengthened by each field's connection to the growing field of cognitive science. In the current climate that promotes the "drill and kill" method of teaching and testing, practitioners and advocates of contextual and applied learning must come together to promote more meaningful pedagogy. By emphasizing the value of authentic teaching and learning as well as the specific context or application, arts education, school-to-career, and service learning have greater access to and authority within the current debate on standards and school reform.

- **Work as colleagues across fields of practice.** Despite the commonalties among arts education, school-to-career, and service learning, the three fields tend to operate on parallel tracks with little or no communication among them. Best practices, lessons learned, tools developed, and research findings from any one field have potential value in all three. Furthermore, forging professional links across arts education, school-to-career, and service learning can reduce the isolation of practitioners by connecting them to like-minded members of their communities and to larger, national movements. This broader professional community requires some effort to develop, and the first step in this development is education. Representatives from the three fields need to learn about each other's "language," history, approach, and goals. That provides the basis for a more in-depth discussion of the shared principles and practices as well as potential for collaboration.

- **Expand scope beyond schools and bring the discussion to a variety of forums.** Much of the most innovative and important work in arts education, school-to-career, and service learning is done outside of schools—both literally outside of school buildings and also outside of the scope of school curricula. After school, summer, and community-based programs often offer youth opportunities in these fields, and it is important to keep them in mind when promoting promising practices and developing the professional community. Representatives from institutions that may not be directly involved in arts education, school-to-career, and service learning but that have great interest in the outcomes of high school reforms and youth development efforts (e.g., postsecondary schools and employers) should also be brought into the discussion. A broad-based engagement strategy builds support for the school reforms necessary to advance authentic teaching and learning.

- **Examine and speak to public perceptions and priorities.** What are the public's values relating to education? What do parents expect for their children? What sparks community interest in schools and youth development? How do young people want to be engaged in their own learning? The core principles of arts education, school-to-career, and service learning define learning in such a way that it no longer "looks like" what people expect school to be. To ease the justifiable public anxiety about "experimenting" in schools and, more importantly, to win public support for authentic learning, there must first be an understanding of the public's perceptions and priorities regarding education and its outcomes for youth. By examining these attitudes, advocates of arts education, school-to-career, and service learning can work together to demonstrate how the core principles and practices of those fields can engage young people, enhance their school performance, and contribute to community revitalization in ways traditional schooling cannot. Together with compelling evidence and data, research on public attitudes can be used to promote effective policies that support arts education, school-to-career, service learning, and their core principles and practices.

To be successful in these activities, it is essential that improving the lives of young people be kept as the central goal. The greatest asset of each of these three fields is that they recognize and value the present contributions and work of young people while simultaneously preparing them for their entry into adulthood. Maintaining this strong focus on the needs of youth is key to motivating young people, teachers, parents, and community members to be involved in and advocate for service learning, school-to-career, and arts education. An even more comprehensive view of youth, the challenges they face, and the opportunities available to them is provided by looking through the lenses of all three fields rather than just one. The integration of these three fields presents an exciting opportunity to expand their impact on the lives of young people.